

When I envision what schools will be like in twenty years, what I see is vastly different from what we know as “school” today. Twenty years from now I envision community learning centers that combine some of the functions of schools, libraries, senior centers, child care centers, and community centers to offer learning opportunities for all members of the community. These learning centers will serve people from all walks of life and provide children and adults alike with ongoing opportunities to continually reinvent themselves through education and training.

What will a community learning center look like? It will be a place for people to come together and find the resources necessary to meet their learning needs. “School” will be one of the offerings of the community learning center, although the definition of “school” will be much looser. While some learners will come to the learning center for more traditional, classroom-based learning, the community learning center will also serve the needs of learners with online learning opportunities and programs that allow for experiential learning in the community. The community learning center will be a gathering place and a resource hub, but the learning facilitated by the center will happen in many places throughout the community, in both the public and private sectors.

One major responsibility of the community learning center will be the education of children, although the “school” function of the learning center will be drastically different from the educational model we use today. According to Alvin Toffler, a noted writer and futurist, 21st century schools need to provide a customized educational experience for learners. The traditional time constraints of the school day will be a thing of the past, because the learning center will be open around the clock. Learners will come and go as their individual needs dictate. Businesses will form partnerships with these learning centers, and teachers will come from the ranks of

trained teachers as well as from the ranks of the business sector. Curriculum will be integrated across the disciplines, and the idea of grouping learners by age and grade will become obsolete. (Daly, 2007)

Inside these learning centers, teaching and learning will look very different from what we find in schools today. The learning center model will not use the teacher-centered, “one size fits all” approach that forces students to operate within a very narrow set of parameters, and results in many students to be classified as learning disabled. On the contrary, the model will consider the learner as a very important customer, and instructional decisions will be driven by the needs of each individual. (Christensen & Horn, 2008)

In keeping with the philosophy of putting the needs of the learner first, the grouping of learners will be different than it is today. Rather than putting learners into grade level groups based on age, groupings will be much more flexible. Multi-age groups of learners will be the norm, and oftentimes learners will be grouped around their interests. A common interest will provide a doorway to exploring that topic across many curricular areas and help develop the concept of inter-connectedness and the relationship between a specific topic and the world at large. Once a group of learners is formed, each learner in the group will be able to choose from a variety of tasks, activities and assessments that complement their particular kind of “smarts”. Some schools today already organize their learning in this way, based on Gardner’s theories of multiple intelligences. (Bernard, 2009) In the learning center model, learners who are “word smart” will have a learning experience that is very different from learners who are “nature smart” or “body smart”, even though the content being studied is the same.

Learning centers will also take a cue from the business world and focus on the strengths of each learner, rather than devoting large amounts of resources to remediate a learner’s

weaknesses. According to the Gallup Organization, when a manager focuses on an employee's weaknesses, the likelihood of that employee being disengaged is over twenty percent. When that same manager begins focusing on the employee's strengths instead, that percentage drops down to one percent. (Rath, 2007) Learning centers will use this knowledge to their advantage. By helping learners discover and develop their strengths, they will ensure that all learners are fully engaged in the learning process. Additionally, by focusing on smarts and strengths, the special education population will decrease greatly as a higher proportion of learners finds success with the new individualized learning model.

With the focus turning towards the learner, the teacher's role in the learning center model will change dramatically. The teacher will move from being the sage on the stage to the guide on the side. Teachers will become mentors and coaches to groups of learners. While the learners engage in the learning process, teachers will be there on the side to add context and value to the learning experience, rather than controlling the experience. (Jukes & McCain, 2007)

The teacher will become more important than ever before in this new model of teaching and learning. Being a content expert will no longer qualify a person to be a teacher. Instead, teachers will need intimate knowledge of how to help learners develop a host of 21st century skills. In addition to the core subjects, teachers will have to guide their learners through the learning process in a way that develops life and career skills (e.g. flexibility, adaptability, accountability), learning and innovation skills (e.g. critical thinking and problem solving, communication, and collaboration), and information, media, and technology skills. (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004)

Technology will play a large role in the learning center of the future, although it is impossible to say what that technology will look like. In twenty years, the Web 2.0 tools we use

today will be as obsolete as a Commodore 64 computer is today. What is certain is that teachers and learners will be able to experience and interpret the world, communicate and collaborate with others, and produce and create in ways that are unprecedented by today's standards. Education will not be all about mastering technology. Instead, teachers and learners will use technology as a tool to facilitate the quest to make sense of the world through analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

Will we see this in twenty years? Unfortunately, I have my doubts. After reading the predictions that were made in 2000 by experts in the field of educational technology, (National School Boards Association, 2000) it seems to me that we are still struggling with many of the same issues that were identified nine years ago. I fear that much like the reading wars that raged on for decades (at great disservice of our students), we are already heading down that same path when it comes to the role of technology in education. There is simply too much discussion about the merits of iPods in the classroom, too much hand wringing about technology access in students' homes, and simply not enough action in terms of meeting the vastly different needs of today's learners. My hope is that the changes in society, brought about by rapidly advancing technologies, will exert tremendous pressure on our educational system and force profound and positive changes in the way teaching and learning occur.

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